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C O N F I D E N T I A L TRIPOLI 000224

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [LY](#)
SUBJECT: CELEBRATING 36 YEARS OF QADHAFI

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REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: A hundred thousand or more Libyans gathered on Martyrs Square in Tripoli August 31 to commemorate the 1969 revolution which brought Colonel Qadhafi to power. Qadhafi passed up the opportunity to address the multitude, but he appeared on the reviewing stand for half an hour to receive the adulation of the crowd and to study a written "declaration of loyalty from all Libyans." Apart from a cheering section supplied by the revolutionary committees, the crowd seemed mostly to have its mind elsewhere; the reaction to a spectacular fireworks display in particular was astonishingly tepid. Generally, outside observers saw in the event what they expected to see; to take one example, an Arab Ambassador who is disdainful of Qadhafi and all his works claimed that the crowd's indifference was a measure of the regime's isolation. End Summary.

¶2. (C) The government did whatever was necessary to get tens of thousands of supporters into the center of Tripoli for Revolution Day celebrations on August 31. Reportedly, government officials in the outlying areas of Libya were told to be in Tripoli for the celebration or risk losing their jobs. We heard rumors that each "shabbiat" (district) official was ordered to be at the ceremony along with a minimum of two other attendees. Universities and other institutions sent busloads of participants. USLO LES staff relayed rumors that the government would hand out 200 dinars to everyone in Green Square the afternoon of August 31. Transportation was a special challenge; there were many reports of security officers arbitrarily commandeering private vans and busses in the larger national interest. In the end, the regime got what it needed -- a large enough crowd to look impressive on television, but not so large as to overwhelm the carefully choreographed program. To judge from the result, officials had more trouble lining up the groups that were to parade in front of the reviewing stand; some of the noisier groups circulated through two or three times in a great circle to fill out the three-hour event.

¶3. (C) The centerpiece of the celebration was a spectacular fireworks display produced by a French company. (In a typically Libyan moment, the French coordinator of the show was visited by Libyan security on the morning of the event and told that the fireworks had been canceled because explosives were too dangerous. That edict was later reversed, and the show went ahead as planned.) Interestingly, while Western observers went to some lengths to find places to see the show, the Libyan crowd was largely indifferent. Many Libyans ignored the bright lights altogether, turning their backs on the display and chatting with friends. Cameramen from state television, who spent most of the evening broadcasting pictures of smiling children and solemn tribesmen, had trouble finding suitable shots during the fireworks. One young woman in particular was shown holding her ears and staring about in confusion when the explosions were at their loudest.

¶4. (C) Qadhafi appeared for about half an hour near the end of the event. When his face popped up on the video screens around

the square, the security cordons dissolved, giving the impression that the tightly packed crowd was surging forward to be close to the leader. The cameras eventually zoomed in on Qadhafi, showing him studying a short document entitled "Pledge of Loyalty from the Libyan People" and containing what appeared to be a few pages of signatures. (One sardonic soul noted that, given the size of the document, there must be about a million signatures per page.) To the surprise of everyone, Qadhafi said nothing at all to the crowd; he was smiling and apparently relaxed, but gave the impression of someone who had done it all many, many times before.

COMMENT

15. (C) Outsiders generally saw what they expected to see. The Egyptian Ambassador -- bored, cranky, and no admirer of the regime in any event -- claimed the indifference of the crowd to the parade and spectacle was a sign of how feeble and out of touch the regime had become. Asked by a slightly startled colleague whether he was predicting that the regime was tottering, the Egyptian spread his hands wide and said, "Why knows? Something like this can glide for a long time before it crashes."

BERRY